

## *Preface*

These essays on India were written over the last decade – about half of them over the last couple of years. The first four, which make up the first part of the collection, introduce and explain the principal themes pursued in this book, related to India's long argumentative tradition.

India is an immensely diverse country with many distinct pursuits, vastly disparate convictions, widely divergent customs and a veritable feast of viewpoints. Any attempt to talk about the culture of the country, or about its past history or contemporary politics, must inescapably involve considerable selection. I need not, therefore, labour the point that the focus on the argumentative tradition in this work is also a result of choice. It does not reflect a belief that this is the only reasonable way of thinking about the history or culture or politics of India. I am very aware that there are other ways of proceeding.

The selection of focus here is mainly for three distinct reasons: the long history of the argumentative tradition in India, its contemporary relevance, and its relative neglect in ongoing cultural discussions. It can in addition be claimed that the simultaneous flourishing of many different convictions and viewpoints in India has drawn substantially on the acceptance – explicitly or by implication – of heterodoxy and dialogue. The reach of Indian heterodoxy is remarkably extensive and ubiquitous.

Consider the politically charged issue of the role of so-called 'ancient India' in understanding the India of today. In contemporary politics, the enthusiasm for ancient India has often come from the Hindutva movement – the promoters of a narrowly Hindu view of

## PREFACE

Indian civilization – who have tried to separate out the period preceding the Muslim conquest of India (from the third millennium BCE to the beginning of the second millennium CE). In contrast, those who take an integrationist approach to contemporary India have tended to view the harking back to ancient India with the greatest of suspicion. For example, the Hindutva activists like invoking the holy Vedas, composed in the second millennium BCE, to define India's 'real heritage'. They are also keen on summoning the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the great epic, for many different purposes, from delineating Hindu beliefs and convictions to finding alleged justification for the forcible demolition of a mosque – the Babri masjid – that is situated at the very spot where the 'divine' Rama, it is claimed, was born. The integrationists, by contrast, have tended to see the Vedas and the *Rāmāyaṇa* as unwelcome intrusions of some specific Hindu beliefs into the contemporary life of secular India.

The integrationists are not wrong to question the factional nature of the choice of 'Hindu classics' over other products of India's long and diverse history. They are also right to point to the counterproductive role that such partisan selection can play in the secular, multi-religious life of today's India. Even though more than 80 per cent of Indians may be Hindu, the country has a very large Muslim population (the third largest among all the countries in the world – larger than the entire British and French populations put together), and a great many followers of other faiths: Christians, Sikhs, Jains, Parsees and others.

However, even after noting the need for integration and for a multicultural perspective, it has to be accepted that these old books and narratives have had an enormous influence on Indian literature and thought. They have deeply influenced literary and philosophical writings on the one hand, and folk traditions of storytelling and critical dialectics on the other. The difficulty does not lie in the importance of the Vedas or the *Rāmāyaṇa*, but in the understanding of their role in Indian culture. When the Muslim Pathan rulers of Bengal arranged for making good Bengali translations of the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa* in the fourteenth century (on which see Essay 3), their enthusiasm for the ancient Indian epics reflected their

## PREFACE

love of culture, rather than any conversion to Hinduism.\* It would be as difficult to ignore their general importance in Indian culture (on some allegedly ‘secular’ ground) as it would be to insist on viewing them through the narrow prism of a particularly raw version of Hindu religiosity.

The Vedas may be full of hymns and religious invocations, but they also tell stories, speculate about the world and – true to the argumentative propensity already in view – ask difficult questions. A basic doubt concerns the very creation of the world: did someone make it, was it a spontaneous emergence, and is there a God who knows what really happened? As is discussed in Essay 1, the *Rigveda* goes on to express radical doubts on these issues: ‘Who really knows? Who will here proclaim it? Whence was it produced? Whence is this creation? . . . perhaps it formed itself, or perhaps it did not – the one who looks down on it, in the highest heaven, only he knows – or perhaps he does not know.’ These doubts from the second millennium BCE would recur again and again in India’s long argumentative history, along with a great many other questions about epistemology and ethics (as is discussed in Essay 1). They survive side by side with intense religious beliefs and deeply respectful faith and devotion.

Similarly, the adherents of Hindu politics – especially those who are given to vandalizing places of worship of other religions – may take Rama to be divine, but in much of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, Rama is treated primarily as a hero – a great ‘epic hero’ – with many good qualities and some weaknesses, including a tendency to harbour suspicions about his wife Sītā’s faithfulness. A pundit who gets considerable space in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, called Jāvālī, not only does not treat Rama as God, he calls his actions ‘foolish’ (‘especially for’, as Jāvālī puts it, ‘an intelligent and wise man’). Before he is persuaded to withdraw his allegations, Jāvālī gets time enough in the *Rāmāyaṇa* to explain in detail

\*As is also discussed in Essay 3, the first translation of the Upaniṣads – the most philosophical part of the Vedic Hindu literature – that caught the attention of European intellectuals was the Persian translation produced in the seventeenth century by the Moghal prince Dara Shikoh, the eldest son (and legitimate heir) of Emperor Shah Jahan and of Mumtaz Mahal (the beautiful queen on whose tomb the Taj Mahal would be built). Dara was killed by his more sectarian brother, Aurangzeb, to seize the Moghal throne.

## PREFACE

that ‘there is no after-world, nor any religious practice for attaining that’, and that ‘the injunctions about the worship of gods, sacrifice, gifts and penance have been laid down in the śāstras [scriptures] by clever people, just to rule over [other] people.’\* The problem with invoking the *Rāmāyaṇa* to propagate a reductionist account of Hindu religiosity lies in the way the epic is deployed for this purpose – as a document of supernatural veracity, rather than as ‘a marvellous parable’ (as Rabindranath Tagore describes it) and a widely enjoyed part of India’s cultural heritage.

The roots of scepticism in India go back a long way, and it would be hard to understand the history of Indian culture if scepticism were to be jettisoned. Indeed, the resilient reach of the tradition of dialectics can be felt throughout Indian history, even as conflicts and wars have led to much violence. Given the simultaneous presence of dialogic encounters and bloody battles in India’s past, the tendency to concentrate only on the latter would miss something of real significance.

It is indeed important to understand the long tradition of accepted heterodoxy in India. In resisting the attempts by the Hindutva activists to capture ancient India as their home ground (and to see it as the unique cradle of Indian civilization), it is not enough to point out that India has many other sources of culture as well. It is necessary also to see how much heterodoxy there has been in Indian thoughts and beliefs from very early days. Not only did Buddhists, Jains, agnostics and atheists compete with each other and with adherents of what we now call Hinduism (a much later term) in the India of the first millennium BCE, but also the dominant religion in India was Buddhism for nearly a thousand years. The Chinese in the first millennium CE standardly referred to India as ‘the Buddhist kingdom’ (the far-reaching effects of the Buddhist connections between the two largest countries in the world are discussed in Essay 8). Ancient India cannot be fitted into the narrow box where the Hindutva activists want to incarcerate it.

It was indeed a Buddhist emperor of India, Ashoka, who, in the third century BCE, not only outlined the need for toleration and the richness of heterodoxy, but also laid down what are perhaps the oldest rules for conducting debates and disputations, with the opponents

\*See Essays 1 and 3 for fuller discussions of these and other examples of ancient scepticism and dialogic combats.

## PREFACE

being 'duly honoured in every way on all occasions'. That political principle figures a great deal in later discussions in India, but the most powerful defence of toleration and of the need for the state to be equidistant from different religions came from a Muslim Indian emperor, Akbar. This was of course much later, but those principles of religious toleration, enunciated in the 1590s, were still early enough at a time when the Inquisition was in full swing in Europe.

The contemporary relevance of the dialogic tradition and of the acceptance of heterodoxy is hard to exaggerate. Discussions and arguments are critically important for democracy and public reasoning. They are central to the practice of secularism and for even-handed treatment of adherents of different religious faiths (including those who have no religious beliefs). Going beyond these basic structural priorities, the argumentative tradition, if used with deliberation and commitment, can also be extremely important in resisting social inequalities and in removing poverty and deprivation. Voice is a crucial component of the pursuit of social justice.

It is sometimes asserted that the use of dialectics is largely confined to the more affluent and more literate, and is thus of no value to the common people. The elitism that is rampant in such a belief is not only extraordinary, it is made more exasperating through the political cynicism and impassivity it tends to encourage. The critical voice is the traditional ally of the aggrieved, and participation in arguments is a general opportunity, not a particularly specialized skill (like composing sonnets or performing trapeze acts).

Just before the Indian general elections in the spring of 2004, when I visited a Bengali village not far from my own home, I was told by a villager, who was barely literate and certainly very poor: 'It is not very hard to silence us, but that is not because we cannot speak.' Indeed, even though the recording and preservation of arguments tend to be biased in the direction of the articulations of the powerful and the well schooled, many of the most interesting accounts of arguments from the past involve members of disadvantaged groups (as is discussed in Essays 1 and 2).

The nature and strength of the dialogic tradition in India is sometimes ignored because of the much championed belief that India is the land of religions, the country of uncritical faiths and unquestioned

## PREFACE

practices. Some cultural theorists, allegedly ‘highly sympathetic’, are particularly keen on showing the strength of the faith-based and unreasoning culture of India and the East, in contrast with the ‘shallow rationalism’ and scientific priorities of the West. This line of argument may well be inspired by sympathy, but it can end up suppressing large parts of India’s intellectual heritage. In this pre-selected ‘East–West’ contrast, meetings are organized, as it were, between Aristotle and Euclid on the one hand, and wise and contented Indian peasants on the other. This is not, of course, an uninteresting exercise, but it is not pre-eminently a better way of understanding the ‘East–West’ cultural contrast than by arranging meetings between, say, Āryabhaṭa (the mathematician) and Kauṭilya (the political economist) on the one hand, and happily determined Visigoths on the other. If the immediate motivation for this book is social and political understanding in India, it has, I believe, some relevance also for the way the classification of the cultures of the world has become cemented into a shape that pays little or no attention to a great deal of our past and present.\*

The four essays in Part I outline the nature, reach and relevance of the argumentative tradition in India. This includes, as is particularly discussed in Essays 1 and 2, the part that pluralism and the dialogic tradition play in supporting democracy, secularism and the pursuit of mathematics and science, and the use that can be made of dialectics in seeking social justice, against the barriers of class, caste, community and gender. Essay 3 discusses the relevance of a capacious understanding of a large and heterodox India, contrasted with the drastically downsized view of the country that appeals to some religious activists, who combine it with a severely miniaturized understanding of Hinduism.† These discussions have relevance, as is discussed in Essay 4, for the way Indian identity can be understood, and the diagnostic issues are relevant not only for Indians in India but also for the large (at least 20 million strong) Indian diaspora across the world.

\*I was impressed to find, on arriving at Harvard in the late 1980s, that all books on India in the bookshop of the famous ‘Harvard Coop’ were kept in the section called ‘Religions’.

†In my Foreword to the reissue of my grandfather K. M. Sen’s book on Hinduism (London: Penguin Books, 2005), I discuss the different ways in which that capacious religion can be seen.

## PREFACE

The essays in Part II deal with the role of communication in the development and understanding of cultures. The discussions in Essays 5 and 6 try to follow and to develop the insights on this subject that emerge from the works of the visionary poet and writer Rabindranath Tagore and the great film director Satyajit Ray. The emergence of different versions of ‘imagined India’ in Western perceptions is investigated in Essay 7, along with the impact that these misconceptions, in turn, have had on the way Indians have tended to see themselves in the colonial or post-colonial period. Essay 8 is devoted to examining the close and extensive intellectual relations (covering science, mathematics, engineering, literature, music, and public health care and administration) that China and India had – along with religion and trade – for a thousand years, beginning in the early part of the first millennium, and the lessons that emerge from all this for contemporary China and India.

Part III is concerned with the politics of deprivation (poverty, class and caste divisions, gender inequality) and with the precariousness of human security in the subcontinent as a result of the development of nuclear weapons in India and Pakistan. Essays 9–12 investigate what has happened and is happening right now, and what issues can appropriately be taken up for critical examination.

The role of reasoning in the identity of Indians is the subject matter of the last part of the book, which begins with an essay on the reach of reasoning, including a rejection of the often-aided claim that analytical reasoning and critique are quintessentially ‘Western’ or ‘European’ traditions. The contribution that reasoned assessment can make to the troubled world in which we live is also examined. Essay 14 subjects the debates on secularism to critical scrutiny, which has implications for the way Indians can see themselves in a multi-religious and multicultural India. India’s multicultural history is wonderfully reflected in the profusion of the well-designed and well-developed calendars that exist, each with a long history. This is the subject matter of Essay 15. That essay also discusses how these calendrical variations have allowed agreement on a ‘principal meridian’ for India – fixed at Ujjain – from the fifth century CE onwards, which still serves as the basis of ‘Indian standard time’ – an odd five and a half hours ahead of Greenwich Mean Time (though it was fixed

## PREFACE

rather earlier than the GMT was born). The final essay is based on the Dorab Tata Lectures I gave in 2001, on the Indian identity, and it returns briefly to the very general issues taken up at the beginning of the book.

I have benefited from the comments and suggestions of many friends and colleagues, and their contributions are acknowledged individually in some of the essays. For the book as a whole, I have also greatly benefited from many helpful suggestions from Sugata Bose, Antara Dev Sen, Jean Drèze, Ayesha Jalal, Martha Nussbaum, V. K. Ramachandran, Kumar Rana and Emma Rothschild. In addition I would like to thank, for advice and comments, Montek Singh Ahluwalia, Sudhir Anand, Pranab Bardhan, Kaushik Basu, Homi Bhabha, Akeel Bilgrami, Gayatri Chakravarti Spivak, Nimai Chatterji, Deependranath Datta, Supurna Datta, Meghnad Desai, Nabaneeta Dev Sen, Krishna Dutta, Nathan Glazer, Sulochana Glazer, Craig Jamieson, Armando Massarenti, Patricia Mirrlees, Pranati Mukhopadhyaya, Siddiq Osmani, Mozaffar Qizilbash, Anisur Rahman, Andrew Robinson, Indrani Sen, Arjun Sengupta, Jagdish Sharma, Robert Silvers, Rehman Sobhan, Leon Wieseltier and Nur Yalman. I must also record my appreciation of the inspiration provided by the analyses of parts of the corpus of Sanskrit literature by Sukumari Bhattacharji and the late Bimal Matilal.

I would also like to express my appreciation of the general guidance I have received from discussions on the structure and content of the book with my editor, Stuart Proffitt, at Penguin. He has also made a number of important suggestions on individual articles. I would also like to acknowledge gratefully the extremely helpful copy-editing done by Elizabeth Stratford. For excellent research assistance I am much indebted to Rosie Vaughan at the Centre for History and Economics in Cambridge. Finally, I am grateful for the joint support from the Ford Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation and the Mellon Foundation in meeting some of the material costs of my research on this and related subjects.

I end with three final remarks. First, since this is a collection of essays (eight new ones and eight previously published), there are some overlaps between them, particularly involving empirical illustrations (though they often illustrate different points). I have eliminated some



## PREFACE

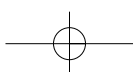
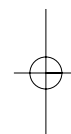
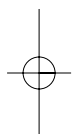
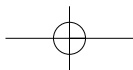
overlaps, but others could not be dropped without making the individual essays incoherent or obscure. I have tried to give cross-references when they could help. Immediately relevant references are given in the footnotes; other citations are in the Notes at the end of the book.

Second, even though I have had to use diacritical marks for the English spelling of Sanskrit words, I have invoked them in extreme moderation (see the explanations on pp. xix–xx). I have used none for some Sanskrit words and names that are by now commonly used in English, such as Raja, Rani, Rama, Krishna, Ashoka, Brahmin, Vedas, Vedantic or Tantric, not to mention the word Sanskrit itself.

The final remark concerns the style of writing. The book aims to be, at one level, an academic study done by a detached observer, but at another level I am caught within the domain of my subject matter. As an involved Indian citizen, who is very concerned with Indian culture, history and politics – and also with general life in India – it is hard for me to refer to Indians as ‘they’ rather than ‘we’. So, ‘we’ it has been, not the distant ‘they’. Further, given my sense of subcontinental identity, particularly with Bangladesh (from where my family comes), the domain of personal affiliation has sometimes been wider than that of India alone. I need not apologize for this, but the reader is entitled to an explanation of my departure from academic impersonality.

AMARTYA SEN

15 August 2004



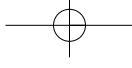
## *Diacritical Notation for Sanskrit Words*

Longer vowels have been denoted by a bar on top: ā as in *father*, ī as in *police*, and ū as in *rule*. Regarding sibilants, s stands for the un-aspirate, as in *sun*, whereas the corresponding aspirate sound is shown as ṣ, as in *shun*, and the strongly palatal s as ś, as in *shanti* (achieved through placing one's tongue on the upper palate).

Retroflex consonants in the so-called 't group' have been shown with a dot below, such as ṭ, ṭh, ḍ, ḍh and ṇ, in contrast with dental t, th, d, dh and n, which are unencumbered. That distinction, which is not captured well in English but is quite critical in Sanskrit, can be illustrated with the difference between the retroflex ṭ in *tiny* and the Italian-inspired dental t in *pasta*. The unaspirated ch as in *China* in English is shown, in line with the standard diacritical convention, by the unadorned c, as in Italian pronunciation when c is followed by an e or an i (e.g. *cento*), with its aspirate variation being shown with ch.

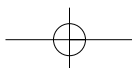
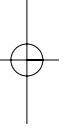
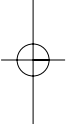
I have eschewed some of the other distinctions, showing for example the Sanskrit semivowel *rhi* simply as *ri*, as in *Rigveda* (rather than the more austere rendering in the form of Ṛgveda). The nasalization symbols used here are: the guttural ṅ (as in *aṅga*), the palatal ñ (as in *jñāna*), the retroflex ṇ (as in *vaṇa*), the dental n (as in *nava*) and the labial m (as in *mantra*). The somewhat varying use of the nasalizing *anusvāra* is denoted by ṁ, as in *ahimsa*.

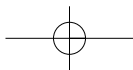
As is explained in the Preface, I have withheld diacritical marks altogether for those Sanskrit words or names which have become familiar expressions in English, such as Raja, Rani, Rama, Krishna, Ashoka, Aryan, Brahmin, Tantric, Vedantic or (for that matter) Sanskrit.



## DIACRITICAL NOTATION FOR SANSKRIT WORDS

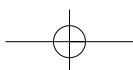
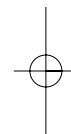
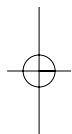
All this involves some shortcuts, but the long route would have been unduly protracted for a book that is aimed at contributing to public discussion. Also, diacritical marks are reserved for Sanskrit words only, and I have not used them at all for words in the modern Indian languages, such as Hindi or Bengali.

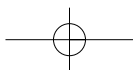
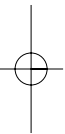
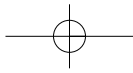


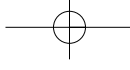


## PART ONE

# Voice and Heterodoxy







# I

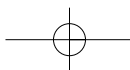
## The Argumentative Indian

Prolixity is not alien to us in India. We are able to talk at some length. Krishna Menon's record of the longest speech ever delivered at the United Nations (nine hours non-stop), established half a century ago (when Menon was leading the Indian delegation), has not been equalled by anyone from anywhere. Other peaks of loquaciousness have been scaled by other Indians. We do like to speak.

This is not a new habit. The ancient Sanskrit epics the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*, which are frequently compared with the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, are colossally longer than the works that the modest Homer could manage. Indeed, the *Mahābhārata* alone is about seven times as long as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* put together. The *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata* are certainly great epics: I recall with much joy how my own life was vastly enriched when I encountered them first as a restless youngster looking for intellectual stimulation as well as sheer entertainment. But they proceed from stories to stories woven around their principal tales, and are engagingly full of dialogues, dilemmas and alternative perspectives. And we encounter masses of arguments and counterarguments spread over incessant debates and disputations.

### *Dialogue and Significance*

The arguments are also, often enough, quite substantive. For example, the famous *Bhagavad Gītā*, which is one small section of the *Mahābhārata*, presents a tussle between two contrary moral positions – Krishna's emphasis on doing one's duty, on one side, and Arjuna's



## THE ARGUMENTATIVE INDIAN

focus on avoiding bad consequences (and generating good ones), on the other. The debate occurs on the eve of the great war that is a central event in the *Mahābhārata*. Watching the two armies readying for war, profound doubts about the correctness of what they are doing are raised by Arjuna, the peerless and invincible warrior in the army of the just and honourable royal family (the Pāṇḍavas) who are about to fight the unjust usurpers (the Kauravas). Arjuna questions whether it is right to be concerned only with one's duty to promote a just cause and be indifferent to the misery and the slaughter – even of one's kin – that the war itself would undoubtedly cause. Krishna, a divine incarnation in the form of a human being (in fact, he is also Arjuna's charioteer), argues against Arjuna. His response takes the form of articulating principles of action – based on the priority of doing one's duty – which have been repeated again and again in Indian philosophy. Krishna insists on Arjuna's duty to fight, irrespective of his evaluation of the consequences. It is a just cause, and, as a warrior and a general on whom his side must rely, Arjuna cannot waver from his obligations, no matter what the consequences are.

Krishna's hallowing of the demands of duty wins the argument, at least as seen in the religious perspective.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Krishna's conversations with Arjuna, the *Bhagavad Gītā*, became a treatise of great theological importance in Hindu philosophy, focusing particularly on the 'removal' of Arjuna's doubts. Krishna's moral position has also been eloquently endorsed by many philosophical and literary commentators across the world, such as Christopher Isherwood and T. S. Eliot. Isherwood in fact translated the *Bhagavad Gītā* into English.<sup>2</sup> This admiration for the *Gītā*, and for Krishna's arguments in particular, has been a lasting phenomenon in parts of European culture. It was spectacularly praised in the early nineteenth century by Wilhelm von Humboldt as 'the most beautiful, perhaps the only true philosophical song existing in any known tongue'.<sup>3</sup> In a poem in *Four Quartets*, Eliot summarizes Krishna's view in the form of an admonishment: 'And do not think of the fruit of action. / Fare forward.' Eliot explains: 'Not fare well, / But fare forward, voyagers.'<sup>4</sup>

And yet, as a debate in which there are two reasonable sides, the epic *Mahābhārata* itself presents, sequentially, each of the two contrary arguments with much care and sympathy.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the tragic



## THE ARGUMENTATIVE INDIAN

desolation that the post-combat and post-carnage land – largely the Indo-Gangetic plain – seems to face towards the end of the *Mahābhārata* can even be seen as something of a vindication of Arjuna's profound doubts. Arjuna's contrary arguments are not really vanquished, no matter what the 'message' of the *Bhagavad Gītā* is meant to be. There remains a powerful case for 'faring well', and not just 'forward'.\*

J. Robert Oppenheimer, the leader of the American team that developed the ultimate 'weapon of mass destruction' during the Second World War, was moved to quote Krishna's words ('I am become death, the destroyer of worlds') as he watched, on 16 July 1945, the awesome force of the first nuclear explosion devised by man.<sup>6</sup> Like the advice that Arjuna had received about his duty as a warrior fighting for a just cause, Oppenheimer the physicist could well find justification in his technical commitment to develop a bomb for what was clearly the right side. Scrutinizing – indeed criticizing – his own actions, Oppenheimer said later on: 'When you see something that is technically sweet, you go ahead and do it and you argue about what to do about it only after you have had your technical success.'<sup>7</sup> Despite that compulsion to 'fare forward', there was reason also for reflecting on Arjuna's concerns: How can good come from killing so many people? And why should I seek victory, kingdom or happiness for my own side?

These arguments remain thoroughly relevant in the contemporary world. The case for doing what one sees as one's duty must be strong, but how can we be indifferent to the consequences that may follow from our doing what we take to be our just duty? As we reflect on the manifest problems of our global world (from terrorism, wars and violence to epidemics, insecurity and gruelling poverty), or on India's special concerns (such as economic development, nuclear confrontation or regional peace), it is important to take on board Arjuna's conse-

\*As a high-school student, when I asked my Sanskrit teacher whether it would be permissible to say that the divine Krishna got away with an incomplete and unconvincing argument, he replied: 'Maybe you could say that, but you must say it with adequate respect.' I have presented elsewhere a critique – I hope with adequate respect – of Krishna's deontology, along with a defence of Arjuna's consequential perspective, in 'Consequential Evaluation and Practical Reason', *Journal of Philosophy* 97 (Sept. 2000).

## THE ARGUMENTATIVE INDIAN

quential analysis, in addition to considering Krishna's arguments for doing one's duty. The univocal 'message of the *Gītā*' requires supplementation by the broader argumentative wisdom of the *Mahābhārata*, of which the *Gītā* is only one small part.

There will be an opportunity in this essay, and in the others to follow, to examine the reach and significance of many of the debates and altercations that have figured prominently in the Indian argumentative tradition. We have to take note not only of the opinions that won – or allegedly won – in the debates, but also of the other points of view that were presented and are recorded or remembered. A defeated argument that refuses to be obliterated can remain very alive.

*Gender, Caste and Voice*

There is, however, a serious question to be asked as to whether the tradition of arguments and disputations has been confined to an exclusive part of the Indian population – perhaps just to the members of the male elite. It would, of course, be hard to expect that argumentational participation would be uniformly distributed over all segments of the population, but India has had deep inequalities along the lines of gender, class, caste and community (on which more presently). The social relevance of the argumentative tradition would be severely limited if disadvantaged sections were effectively barred from participation. The story here is, however, much more complex than a simple generalization can capture.

I begin with gender. There can be little doubt that men have tended, by and large, to rule the roost in argumentative moves in India. But despite that, the participation of women in both political leadership and intellectual pursuits has not been at all negligible. This is obvious enough today, particularly in politics. Indeed, many of the dominant political parties in India – national as well as regional – are currently led by women and have been so led in the past. But even in the national movement for Indian independence, led by the Congress Party, there were many more women in positions of importance than in the Russian and Chinese revolutionary movements put together. It is also perhaps worth noting that Sarojini Naidu, the first woman

## THE ARGUMENTATIVE INDIAN

President of the Indian National Congress, was elected in 1925, fifty years earlier than the election of the first woman leader of a major British political party (Margaret Thatcher in 1975).<sup>\*</sup> The second woman head of the Indian National Congress, Nellie Sengupta, was elected in 1933.

Earlier or later, these developments are products of relatively recent times. But what about the distant past? Women's traditional role in debates and discussions has certainly been much less pronounced than that of men in India (as would also be true of most countries in the world). But it would be a mistake to think that vocal leadership by women is completely out of line with anything that has happened in India's past. Indeed, even if we go back all the way to ancient India, some of the most celebrated dialogues have involved women, with the sharpest questionings often coming from women interlocutors. This can be traced back even to the *Upaniṣads* – the dialectical treatises that were composed from about the eighth century BCE and which are often taken to be foundations of Hindu philosophy.

For example, in the *Bṛihadāranyaka Upaniṣad* we are told about the famous 'arguing combat' in which Yājñavalkya, the outstanding scholar and teacher, has to face questions from the assembled gathering of pundits, and here it is a woman scholar, Gārgī, who provides the sharpest edge to the intellectual interrogation. She enters the fray without any special modesty: 'Venerable Brahmins, with your permission I shall ask him two questions only. If he is able to answer those questions of mine, then none of you can ever defeat him in expounding the nature of God.'<sup>8</sup>

Even though Gārgī, as an intellectual and pedagogue, is no military leader (in the mode, for example, of the Rani of Jhansi – another fem-

<sup>\*</sup>The Presidentship of the Congress Party was not by any means a formal position only. Indeed, the election of Subhas Chandra Bose (the fiery spokesman of the increasing – and increasingly forceful – resistance to the British Raj) as the President of Congress in 1938 and in 1939 led to a great inner-party tussle, with Mohandas Gandhi working tirelessly to oust Bose. This was secured – not entirely with propriety or elegance – shortly after Bose's Presidential Address proposing a strict 'time limit' for the British to quit India or to face a less nonviolent opposition. The role of the Congress President in directing the Party has remained important. In the general elections in 2004, when Sonia Gandhi emerged victorious as the President of Congress, she chose to remain in that position, rather than take up the role of Prime Minister.

## THE ARGUMENTATIVE INDIAN

inine hero – who fought valiantly along with the ‘mutineers’ in the middle of the nineteenth century against British rule – one of the great ‘warrior-queens’ of the world, as Antonia Fraser describes her<sup>9</sup>), her use of imagery is strikingly militant: ‘Yājñavalkya, I have two questions for you. Like the ruler of Videha or Kāśī [Benares], coming from a heroic line, who strings his unstrung bow, takes in hand two penetrating arrows and approaches the enemy, so do I approach you with two questions, which you have to answer.’ Yājñavalkya does, however, manage to satisfy Gārgī with his answers (I am not competent to examine the theological merits of this interchange and will refrain from commenting on the substantive content of their discussion). Gārgī acknowledges this handsomely, but again without undue modesty: ‘Venerable Brahmins, you should consider it an achievement if you can get away after bowing to him. Certainly, none of you can ever defeat him in expounding the nature of God.’

Interestingly, Yājñavalkya’s wife Maitreyī raises a profoundly important motivational question when the two discuss the reach of wealth in the context of the problems and predicaments of human life, in particular what wealth can or cannot do for us. Maitreyī wonders whether it could be the case that if ‘the whole earth, full of wealth’ were to belong just to her, she could achieve immortality through it. ‘No,’ responds Yājñavalkya, ‘like the life of rich people will be your life. But there is no hope of immortality by wealth.’ Maitreyī remarks: ‘What should I do with that by which I do not become immortal?’<sup>10</sup>

Maitreyī’s rhetorical question has been repeatedly cited in Indian religious philosophy to illustrate both the nature of the human predicament and the limitations of the material world. But there is another aspect of this exchange that has, in some ways, more immediate interest. This concerns the relation – and the distance – between income and achievement, between the commodities we can buy and the actual capabilities we can enjoy, between our economic wealth and our ability to live as we would like.\* While there is a connection

\*Maitreyī’s central question (‘What should I do with that by which I do not become immortal?’) was useful for me to motivate and explain an understanding of development that is not parasitic on judging development by the growth of GNP or GDP; see my *Development as Freedom* (New York: Knopf, and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 1.

## THE ARGUMENTATIVE INDIAN

between opulence and our ability to achieve what we value, the linkage may or may not be very close. Maitreyī's worldly worries might well have some transcendental relevance (as Indian religious commentators have discussed over many centuries), but they certainly have worldly interest as well. If we are concerned with the freedom to live long and live well, our focus has to be directly on life and death, and not just on wealth and economic opulence.

The arguments presented by women speakers in epics and classical tales, or in recorded history, do not always conform to the tender and peace-loving image that is often assigned to women. In the epic story of the *Mahābhārata*, the good King Yudhiṣṭhira, reluctant to engage in a bloody battle, is encouraged to fight the usurpers of his throne with 'appropriate anger', and the most eloquent instigator is his wife, Draupadī.<sup>11</sup>

In the sixth-century version of this dialogue, presented in the *Kirātārjunīya* by Bhāravi, Draupadī speaks thus:

For a woman to advise men like you  
is almost an insult.  
And yet, my deep troubles compel me  
to overstep the limits of womanly conduct,  
make me speak up.

The kings of your race, brave as Indra,  
have for a long time ruled the earth without a break.  
But now with your own hand  
you have thrown it away,  
like a rutting elephant tearing off  
his garland with his trunk. . . .

If you choose to reject heroic action  
and see forbearance as the road to future happiness,  
then throw away your bow, the symbol of royalty,  
wear your hair matted in knots,  
stay here and make offerings in the sacred fire!<sup>12</sup>

It is not hard to see which side Draupadī was on in the Arjuna–Krishna debate, which deals with a later stage of the same sequence of events, by which time Yudhiṣṭhira had made his choice to

## THE ARGUMENTATIVE INDIAN

fight (rather than embrace the life of a local hermit, mockingly assigned to him by his wife, with unconcealed derision).

If it is important not to see the Indian argumentative tradition as the exclusive preserve of men, it is also necessary to understand that the use of argumentative encounters has frequently crossed the barriers of class and caste. Indeed, the challenge to religious orthodoxy has often come from spokesmen of socially disadvantaged groups. Disadvantage is, of course, a comparative concept. When Brahminical orthodoxy was disputed in ancient India by members of other groups (including merchants and craftsmen), the fact that the protesters were often quite affluent should not distract attention from the fact that, in the context of Brahmin-dominated orthodoxy, they were indeed distinctly underprivileged. This may be particularly significant in understanding the class basis of the rapid spread of Buddhism, in particular, in India. The undermining of the superiority of the priestly caste played quite a big part in these initially rebellious religious movements, which include Jainism as well as Buddhism. It included a 'levelling' feature that is not only reflected in the message of human equality for which these movements stood, but is also captured in the nature of the arguments used to undermine the claim to superiority of those occupying exalted positions. Substantial parts of early Buddhist and Jain literatures contain expositions of protest and resistance.

Movements against caste divisions that have figured repeatedly in Indian history, with varying degrees of success, have made good use of engaging arguments to question orthodox beliefs. Many of these counterarguments are recorded in the epics, indicating that opposition to hierarchy was not absent even in the early days of caste arrangements. We do not know whether the authors to whom the sceptical arguments are attributed were the real originators of the doubts expressed, or mere vehicles of exposition of already established questioning, but the prominent presence of these anti-inequality arguments in the epics as well as in other classical documents gives us a fuller insight into the reach of the argumentative tradition than a monolithic exposition of the so-called 'Hindu point of view' can possibly provide.

For example, when, in the *Mahābhārata*, Bhṛigu tells Bharadvāja

## THE ARGUMENTATIVE INDIAN

that caste divisions relate to differences in physical attributes of different human beings, reflected in skin colour, Bharadvāja responds not only by pointing to the considerable variations in skin colour *within* every caste ('if different colours indicate different castes, then all castes are mixed castes'), but also by the more profound question: 'We all seem to be affected by desire, anger, fear, sorrow, worry, hunger, and labour; how do we have caste differences then?'<sup>13</sup> There is also a genealogical scepticism expressed in another ancient document, the *Bhaviṣya Purāṇa*: 'Since members of all the four castes are children of God, they all belong to the same caste. All human beings have the same father, and children of the same father cannot have different castes.' These doubts do not win the day, but nor are their expressions obliterated in the classical account of the debates between different points of view.

To look at a much later period, the tradition of 'medieval mystical poets', well established by the fifteenth century, included exponents who were influenced both by the egalitarianism of the Hindu Bhakti movement and by that of the Muslim Sufis, and their far-reaching rejection of social barriers brings out sharply the reach of arguments across the divisions of caste and class. Many of these poets came from economically and socially humble backgrounds, and their questioning of social divisions as well as of the barriers of disparate religions reflected a profound attempt to deny the relevance of these artificial restrictions. It is remarkable how many of the exponents of these heretical points of views came from the working class: Kabir, perhaps the greatest poet of them all, was a weaver, Dadu a cotton-carder, Ravi-das a shoe-maker, Sena a barber, and so on.\* Also, many leading figures in these movements were women, including of course the famous Mira Bai (whose songs are still very popular, after four hundred years), but also Andal, Daya-bai, Sahajo-bai and Ksema, among others.

In dealing with issues of contemporary inequality, which will be discussed in the next essay, the relevance and reach of the argumentative tradition must be examined in terms of the contribution it can

\*On this, see Kshiti Mohan Sen, *Medieval Mysticism of India*, with a Foreword by Rabindranath Tagore, trans. from Bengali by Manomohan Ghosh (London: Luzac, 1930).

## THE ARGUMENTATIVE INDIAN

make today in resisting and undermining these inequities which characterize so much of contemporary Indian society. It would be a great mistake in that context to assume that because of the possible effectiveness of well-tutored and disciplined arguments, the argumentative tradition must, in general, favour the privileged and the well-educated, rather than the dispossessed and the deprived. Some of the most powerful arguments in Indian intellectual history have, in fact, been about the lives of the least privileged groups, which have drawn on the substantive force of these claims, rather than on the cultivated brilliance of well-trained dialectics.

*Democracy as Public Reasoning*

Does the richness of the tradition of argument make much difference to subcontinental lives today? I would argue it does, and in a great many different ways. It shapes our social world and the nature of our culture. It has helped to make heterodoxy the natural state of affairs in India (more on this presently): persistent arguments are an important part of our public life. It deeply influences Indian politics, and is particularly relevant, I would argue, to the development of democracy in India and the emergence of its secular priorities.

The historical roots of democracy in India are well worth considering, if only because the connection with public argument is often missed, through the temptation to attribute the Indian commitment to democracy simply to the impact of British influence (despite the fact that such an influence should have worked similarly for a hundred other countries that emerged from an empire on which the sun used not to set). The point at issue, however, is not specific to India only: in general, the tradition of public reasoning is closely related to the roots of democracy across the globe. But since India has been especially fortunate in having a long tradition of public arguments, with toleration of intellectual heterodoxy, this general connection has been particularly effective in India. When, more than half a century ago, independent India became the first country in the non-Western world to choose a resolutely democratic constitution, it not only used what it had learned from the institutional experiences in Europe and America



## THE ARGUMENTATIVE INDIAN

(particularly Great Britain), it also drew on its own tradition of public reasoning and argumentative heterodoxy.

India's unusual record as a robust, non-Western democracy includes not just its popular endorsement, following independence from the British Raj, of the democratic form of government, but also the tenacious persistence of that system, in contrast to many other countries where democracy has intermittently made cameo appearances. It includes, importantly in this context, the comprehensive acceptance by the armed forces (differently from the military in many other countries in Asia and Africa) as well as by the political parties (from the Communist left to the Hindu right, across the political spectrum) of the priority of civilian rule – no matter how inefficient and awkward (and how temptingly replaceable) democratic governance might have seemed.

The decisive experiences in India also include the unequivocal rejection by the Indian electorate of a very prominent attempt, in the 1970s, to dilute democratic guarantees in India (on the alleged ground of the seriousness of the 'emergency' that India then faced). The officially sponsored proposal was massively rebuffed in the polls in 1977.<sup>14</sup> Even though Indian democracy remains imperfect and flawed in several different ways (more on that later, in Essays 9–12), the ways and means of overcoming those faults can draw powerfully on the argumentational tradition.

It is very important to avoid the twin pitfalls of (1) taking democracy to be just a gift of the Western world that India simply accepted when it became independent, and (2) assuming that there is something unique in Indian history that makes the country singularly suited to democracy. The point, rather, is that democracy is intimately connected with public discussion and interactive reasoning. Traditions of public discussion exist across the world, not just in the West.<sup>15</sup> And to the extent that such a tradition can be drawn on, democracy becomes easier to institute and also to preserve.

Even though it is very often repeated that democracy is a quintessentially Western idea and practice, that view is extremely limited because of its neglect of the intimate connections between public reasoning and the development of democracy – a connection that has been profoundly explored by contemporary philosophers, most

## THE ARGUMENTATIVE INDIAN

notably John Rawls.<sup>16</sup> Public reasoning includes the opportunity for citizens to participate in political discussions and to influence public choice. Balloting can be seen as only one of the ways – albeit a very important way – to make public discussions effective, when the opportunity to vote is combined with the opportunity to speak and listen, without fear. The reach – and effectiveness – of voting depend critically on the opportunity for open public discussion.

A broader understanding of democracy – going well beyond the freedom of elections and ballots – has emerged powerfully, not only in contemporary political philosophy, but also in the new disciplines of ‘social choice theory’ and ‘public choice theory’, influenced by economic reasoning as well as by political ideas.\* In addition to the fact that open discussions on important public decisions can vastly enhance information about society and about our respective priorities, they can also provide the opportunity for revising the chosen priorities in response to public discussion. Indeed, as James Buchanan, the founder of the contemporary discipline of public choice theory, has argued: ‘the definition of democracy as “government by discussion” implies that individual values can and do change in the process of decision-making.’<sup>17</sup> The role of the argumentative tradition of India applies not merely to the public expression of values, but also to the interactive formation of values, illustrated for example by the emergence of the Indian form of secularism (to be discussed in the next section).

Long traditions of public discussion can be found across the world, in many different cultures, as I have discussed elsewhere.<sup>18</sup> But here India does have some claim to distinction – not unrelated to the major theme of this essay. The Greek and Roman heritage on public discussion is, of course, rightly celebrated, but the importance attached to public deliberation also has a remarkable history in India. As it happens, even the world-conquering Alexander received

\*I have tried to present critical assessments of the contributions of social choice theory and of public choice theory in my Presidential Address to the American Economic Association (‘Rationality and Social Choice’, *American Economic Review*, 85, 1995) and in my Nobel Lecture (‘The Possibility of Social Choice’, *American Economic Review*, 89, 1999). Both are included in a collection of my essays: *Rationality and Freedom* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002).

## THE ARGUMENTATIVE INDIAN

some political lecturing as he roamed around north-west India in the fourth century BCE. For example, when Alexander asked a group of Jain philosophers why they were paying so little attention to the great conqueror, he got the following – broadly anti-imperial – reply (as reported by Arrian):

King Alexander, every man can possess only so much of the earth's surface as this we are standing on. You are but human like the rest of us, save that you are always busy and up to no good, travelling so many miles from your home, a nuisance to yourself and to others! . . . You will soon be dead, and then you will own just as much of the earth as will suffice to bury you.\*

In the history of public reasoning in India, considerable credit must be given to the early Indian Buddhists, who had a great commitment to discussion as a means of social progress. That commitment produced, among other results, some of the earliest open general meetings in the world. The so-called 'Buddhist councils', which aimed at settling disputes between different points of view, drew delegates from different places and from different schools of thought. The first of the four principal councils was held in Rājagriha shortly after Gautama Buddha's death; the second about a century later in Vaiśālī; and the last occurred in Kashmir in the second century CE. But the third – the largest and the best known of these councils – occurred under the patronage of Emperor Ashoka in the third century BCE, in the then capital of India, Pāṭaliputra (now called Patna).<sup>19</sup> These councils were primarily concerned with resolving differences in religious principles and practices, but they evidently also addressed the demands of social and civic duties, and furthermore helped, in a general way, to consolidate and promote the tradition of open discussion on contentious issues.

The association of Ashoka, who ruled over the bulk of the Indian subcontinent (stretching into what is now Afghanistan), with the largest of these councils is of particular interest, since he was strongly

\*Alexander, we learn from Arrian, responded to this egalitarian reproach with the same kind of admiration that he had shown in his encounter with Diogenes, even though his own conduct remained altogether unchanged ('the exact opposite of what he then professed to admire'). See Peter Green, *Alexander of Macedon, 356–323 B.C.: A Historical Biography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), p. 428.

## THE ARGUMENTATIVE INDIAN

committed to making sure that public discussion could take place without animosity or violence. Ashoka tried to codify and propagate what must have been among the earliest formulations of rules for public discussion – a kind of ancient version of the nineteenth-century ‘Robert’s Rules of Order’.<sup>20</sup> He demanded, for example, ‘restraint in regard to speech, so that there should be no extolment of one’s own sect or disparagement of other sects on inappropriate occasions, and it should be moderate even on appropriate occasions’. Even when engaged in arguing, ‘other sects should be duly honoured in every way on all occasions’.

Ashoka’s championing of public discussion has had echoes in the later history of India, but none perhaps as strong as the Moghal Emperor Akbar’s sponsorship and support for dialogues between adherents of different faiths, nearly two thousand years later. Akbar’s overarching thesis that ‘the pursuit of reason’ rather than ‘reliance on tradition’ is the way to address difficult problems of social harmony included a robust celebration of reasoned dialogues.<sup>21</sup> A royal sponsorship is not essential for the practice of public reasoning, but it adds another dimension to the reach of the argumentative history of India. In the deliberative conception of democracy, the role of open discussion, with or without sponsorship by the state, has a clear relevance. While democracy must also demand much else,<sup>22</sup> public reasoning, which is central to participatory governance, is an important part of a bigger picture. I shall have occasion to return to this connection later.

*Understanding Secularism*

The long history of heterodoxy has a bearing not only on the development and survival of democracy in India, it has also richly contributed, I would argue, to the emergence of secularism in India, and even to the form that Indian secularism takes, which is not exactly the same as the way secularism is defined in parts of the West.<sup>23</sup> The tolerance of religious diversity is implicitly reflected in India’s having served as a shared home – in the chronology of history – for Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, Jews, Christians, Muslims, Parsees, Sikhs, Baha’is

## THE ARGUMENTATIVE INDIAN

and others. The Vedas, which date back at least to the middle of the second millennium BCE, paved the way to what is now called Hinduism (that term was devised much later by Persians and Arabs, after the river Sindhu or Indus). Buddhism and Jainism had both emerged by the sixth century BCE. Buddhism, the practice of which is now rather sparse in India, was the dominant religion of the country for nearly a thousand years. Jainism, on the other hand, born at the same time as Buddhism, has survived as a powerful Indian religion over two and a half millennia.

Jews came to India, it appears, shortly after the fall of Jerusalem, though there are other theories as well (including the claim that members of the Bene Israeli community first arrived in the eighth century BCE, and, more plausibly, that they came in 175 BCE).<sup>24</sup> Jewish arrivals continued in later waves, in the fifth and sixth centuries from southern Arabia and Persia until the last wave of Baghdadi Jews from Iraq and Syria, mostly to Bombay and Calcutta, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Christians, too, came very early, and by the fourth century there were large Christian communities in what is now Kerala.<sup>25</sup> Parsees started arriving in the late seventh century, as soon as persecution of Zoroastrianism began in Persia. The Baha'is were among the last groups to seek refuge in India, in the last century. Over this long period there were other migrations, including the settlement of Muslim Arab traders, which began on India's western coast in the eighth century, well before the invasions that came from other Muslim countries via the more warlike north-western routes. There were in addition many conversions, especially to Islam. Each religious community managed to retain its identity within India's multi-religious spectrum.\*

The toleration of diversity has also been explicitly defended by strong arguments in favour of the richness of variation, including fulsome praise of the need to interact with each other, in mutual respect, through dialogue. In the last section, I discussed the contributions made to public reasoning by two of the grandest of Indian

\*One of the reflections of this diversity can be seen in the survival of the different calendars that are respectively associated with Buddhism, Jainism, Judaism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism and Islam, which have all been flourishing for a very long time in India, along with the different Hindu calendars (as is discussed in Essay 15 below).

## THE ARGUMENTATIVE INDIAN

emperors, Ashoka and Akbar. How relevant are their ideas and policies for the content and reach of Indian secularism?

Ashoka, as was mentioned earlier, wanted a general agreement on the need to conduct arguments with 'restraint in regard to speech': 'a person must not do reverence to his own sect or disparage the beliefs of another without reason.' He went on to argue: 'Depreciation should be for specific reasons only, because the sects of other people all deserve reverence for one reason or another.' Ashoka supplemented this general moral and political principle by a dialectical argument based on enlightened self-interest: 'For he who does reverence to his own sect while disparaging the sects of others wholly from attachment to his own sect, in reality inflicts, by such conduct, the severest injury on his own sect.'<sup>26</sup>

Akbar not only made unequivocal pronouncements on the priority of tolerance, but also laid the formal foundations of a secular legal structure and of religious neutrality of the state, which included the duty to ensure that 'no man should be interfered with on account of religion, and anyone is to be allowed to go over to a religion that pleases him.'<sup>27</sup> Despite his deep interest in other religions and his brief attempt to launch a new religion, *Din-ilahi* (God's religion), based on a combination of good points chosen from different faiths, Akbar did remain a good Muslim himself. Indeed, when Akbar died in 1605, the Islamic theologian Abdul Haq, who had been quite critical of Akbar's lapses from orthodoxy, concluded with some satisfaction that, despite his 'innovations', Akbar had remained a proper Muslim.<sup>28</sup>

The meetings that Akbar arranged in the late sixteenth century for public dialogue (referred to in the last section) involved members of different religious faiths (including Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Parsees, Jains, Jews and even atheists). While the historical background of Indian secularism can be traced to the trend of thinking that had begun to take root well before Akbar, the politics of secularism received a tremendous boost from Akbar's championing of pluralist ideals, along with his insistence that the state should be completely impartial between different religions. Akbar's own political decisions also reflected his pluralist commitments, well exemplified even by his insistence on filling his court with non-Muslim intellectuals and artists

## THE ARGUMENTATIVE INDIAN

(including the great Hindu musician Tansen) in addition to Muslim ones, and, rather remarkably, by his trusting a Hindu former king (Raja Man Singh), who had been defeated earlier by Akbar, to serve as the general commander of his armed forces.<sup>29</sup>

The tolerance of variation in different walks of life has also had other – if less regal – support throughout Indian history, including in Sanskrit drama, with criticism and ridicule of narrow-minded persecution, for example in Śūdraka's *Mricchakaṭikam* (The Little Clay Cart) and *Mudrārākṣasam* (The Signet of the Minister). It finds expression also in Sanskrit poetry, with celebration of diversity, perhaps most elegantly expressed in Kālidāsa's *Meghadūtam* (The Cloud Messenger), which applauds the beauty of varieties of human customs and behaviour through the imagined eyes of a cloud that carries a message of longing from a banished husband to his beloved wife, as the cloud slowly journeys across fifth-century India. A similar commitment to accepting – and exalting – diversity can be seen in many other writings, from the prose and poetry of Amir Khusrau, a Muslim scholar and poet in the fourteenth century, to the rich culture of non-sectarian religious poetry which flourished from around that time, drawing on both Hindu (particularly Bhakti) and Muslim (particularly Sufi) traditions. Indeed, interreligious tolerance is a persistent theme in the poetry of Kabir, Dadu, Ravi-das, Sena and others, a circle which, as was discussed earlier, also included a number of distinguished women poets, such as the remarkable Mira Bai in the sixteenth century.<sup>30</sup>

Secularism in contemporary India, which received legislative formulation in the post-independence constitution of the Indian Republic, contains strong influences of Indian intellectual history, including the championing of intellectual pluralism. One reflection of this historical connection is that Indian secularism takes a somewhat different form and makes rather different demands from the more austere Western versions, such as the French interpretation of secularism which is supposed to prohibit even personal display of religious symbols or conventions in state institutions at work. Indeed, there are two principal approaches to secularism, focusing respectively on (1) *neutrality* between different religions, and (2) *prohibition* of religious associations in state activities. Indian

## THE ARGUMENTATIVE INDIAN

secularism has tended to emphasize neutrality in particular, rather than prohibition in general.\*

It is the 'prohibitory' aspect that has been the central issue in the recent French decision to ban the wearing of headscarves by Muslim women students, on the ground that it violates secularism. It can, however, be argued that such a prohibition could not be justified specifically on grounds of secularism, if we accept the 'neutrality' interpretation of secularism that has powerfully emerged in India. The secular demand that the state be 'equidistant' from different religions (including agnosticism and atheism) need not disallow any person individually – irrespective of his or her religion – from deciding what to wear, so long as members of different faiths are treated symmetrically.

The immediate issue here is not so much whether the French ban is the wrong policy. It could, quite possibly, be justified for some other reason (other than the alleged violation of secularism), for example on the grounds that the headscarves are symbols of gender inequality and can be seen as demeaning to women, or that women (especially young girls) do not really have the freedom to decide what to wear, and that dress decisions are imposed on them by more powerful members of families (with male dominance).† Those can be important concerns (I shall not undertake here a critical scrutiny of

\*As will be discussed in the essays that follow, Indian secularism has drawn very severe criticism in recent years from Hindu political activists. While some parts of that attack are based, explicitly or implicitly, on demanding a special place for Hinduism in Indian polity (thereby going against the principle of neutrality), another part of the critique has taken the form of arguing that Indian constitution and practice have not been adequately neutral, and have allowed special treatment of Muslims, for example in exempting some Muslim conventions (such as polygamy) from the legal reach of the civil code that applies to members of all the other communities in India. The issues involved in this critique are discussed – and assessed – in Essay 14. What is important to note here is that the focus of that debate is on the 'neutrality' aspect of secularism, rather than on the 'prohibition' of all religious associations.

†The phenomenon of 'choice inhibition', when the individual is, in principle, free to choose, but cannot in practice exercise that choice (given the totality of social concerns and asymmetries of implicit power), is an important issue in the analysis of liberty in 'social choice theory', which I have tried to investigate elsewhere: 'Liberty and Social Choice', *Journal of Philosophy*, 80 (Jan. 1983); 'Minimal Liberty', *Economica*, 59 (1992); and *Rationality and Freedom*.



## THE ARGUMENTATIVE INDIAN

their comparative relevance and force), but they are distinct from the demands of secularism itself.

The point is that the banning of an individual's freedom to choose what to wear could not be justified on the ground of secularism as such when that principle is interpreted in terms of the need for the state to be neutral between the different faiths. Being equidistant between different religions does involve a rejection of favouring one religion over another, and this could be taken to imply that state schools should not follow an asymmetrical policy of brandishing symbols from one religion, while excluding others, in the school's own display.\* But it need not rule against the freedom of each person individually to make his or her own decisions on what to wear – decisions that others should be willing to respect.

As Ashoka put it in the third century BCE: 'concord, therefore, is meritorious, to wit, hearkening and hearkening *willingly* to the Law of Piety as accepted by other people.'<sup>31</sup> The form as well as the interpretation and understanding of secularism in India can be linked to the history of the acceptance of heterodoxy.

*Sceptics, Agnostics and Atheists*

The long tradition of arguing also has considerable bearing on the reading of India's past, along with the understanding of contemporary India. Recognizing the history of heterodoxy in India is critically important for coming to grips with the cross-current of ideas, including intellectual processes and scrutinized convictions, that have survived through the turbulence and turmoil of Indian history. Underestimation of that heterodoxy, which alas is far too common, can prevent an adequate understanding of Indian traditions. Let me illustrate this with the status and relevance of religion in India, in

\*When I attended a degree-giving convocation, which was described as 'secular', at Dhaka University in Bangladesh in 1999, I was struck by the fact that we had ten minutes each of readings from Muslim, Hindu, Christian and Buddhist texts. While this was a lot of religious thinking at one go, I could see that the ceremony could indeed be described as a 'secular' function under the 'neutrality' interpretation of secularism (I suppose agnostics would have had to free-ride on the scepticism of Buddhism).

## THE ARGUMENTATIVE INDIAN

particular the need to understand the long heritage of religious scepticism in India.

The powerful presence of religious scepticism in India goes – or at least may appear to go – against a standard characterization of Indian culture, which is exceedingly common, that takes the form of focusing particularly on religion in interpreting Indian traditions. The religious connection is certainly there. For example, it is indeed the case that India has a massive religious literature – perhaps more voluminous than any other country. This is among the reasons for associating the understanding of Indian civilization with religiosity – not merely at the level of popular practice but also that of intellectual engagement. As the Reverend A. C. Bouquet, an accomplished expert on comparative religion, has pointed out: ‘India in particular furnishes within its limits examples of every conceivable type of attempt at the solution of the religious problem.’<sup>32</sup>

And so it does. However, these grand explorations of every possible religious belief coexist with deeply sceptical arguments that are also elaborately explored (sometimes within the religious texts themselves), going back all the way to the middle of the second millennium BCE. The so-called ‘song of creation’ (or the ‘creation hymn’, as it is sometimes called) in the authoritative Vedas ends with the following radical doubts:

Who really knows? Who will here proclaim it? Whence was it produced?

Whence is this creation? The gods came afterwards, with the creation of this universe. Who then knows whence it has arisen?

Whence this creation has arisen – perhaps it formed itself, or perhaps it did not – the one who looks down on it, in the highest heaven, only he knows – or perhaps he does not know.\*

\**Rigveda*, 10. 129. English translation by Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty, in *The Rig Veda: An Anthology* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1981), pp. 25–6. The Vedas also contain many engaging discussions of worldly affairs. For example – in hymn 34 of *Rigveda* – we get a critical, but rather sympathetic, examination of the many problems that the compulsive gambler faces, who grumbles (‘my mother-in-law hates me’; ‘my wife pushes me away’) and resolves to reform (‘I will not gamble in the future, I am looked down on by my friends’), but who finds it hard to change his old habits (‘I show up there like an adulteress visiting the appointed place’) yet easy to advise others (‘Do not play with dice. Cultivate your field and remain content with whatsoever you earn’).

## THE ARGUMENTATIVE INDIAN

These 3,500-year-old doubts would recur in Indian critical debates again and again. Indeed, Sanskrit not only has a bigger body of religious literature than exists in any other classical language, it also has a larger volume of agnostic or atheistic writings than in any other classical language. There are a great many discussions and compositions of different kinds, conforming to the loquaciousness of the argumentative tradition.

Indian texts include elaborate religious expositions and protracted defence. They also contain lengthy and sustained debates among different religious schools. But there are, in addition, a great many controversies between defenders of religiosity on one side, and advocates of general scepticism on the other. The doubts sometimes take the form of agnosticism, sometimes that of atheism, but there is also Gautama Buddha's special strategy of combining his theoretical scepticism about God with a practical subversion of the significance of the question by making the choice of good behaviour completely independent of any God – real or imagined.\* Indeed, different forms of godlessness have had a strong following throughout Indian history, as they do today.

The 'Lokāyata' philosophy of scepticism and materialism flourished from the first millennium BCE, possibly even in Buddha's own time (judging from some references in the early Buddhist literature), some two and a half millennia ago.<sup>33</sup> There is even some evidence of the influence of that line of thinking in the Upaniṣads.<sup>34</sup> Atheism and materialism continued to attract adherents and advocates over many centuries, and were increasingly associated with the exposition of the

\*Gautama's own position on this is, of course, a far cry from the practice of attributing divinity to Buddha himself in some versions of later Buddhism, led by the *nirmāṇa-kāya* doctrine in Mahāyāna teaching. There is also the more general problem, which Ian Mabbett discusses, that 'in analyzing the rise of Buddhism we cannot deny a very important role to the way in which the proponents of *dhamma* interacted with the scattered population of the villages and forest hamlets. From the beginning, Buddhism had to come to terms with these populations' belief in special beings and special powers, of a sort that we normally call supernatural' (Ian Mabbett, 'Early Indian Buddhism and the Supernatural', in Dipak Bhattacharya, Moinul Hassan and Kumkum Ray (eds.), *India and Indology: Professor Sukumari Bhattacharji Felicitation Volume* (Kolkata [Calcutta]: National Book Agency, 2004), p. 503).

## THE ARGUMENTATIVE INDIAN

intellectually combative Cārvāka.\* That ‘undercurrent of Indian thought’, as D. N. Jha has described it, finds later expression in other texts, for example in the ‘materialist philosophical text . . . *Tattopalavasimha* written by a certain Jayarishi in the eighth century’.<sup>35</sup> In the fourteenth century when Mādhava Ācārya (himself a Vedantist Hindu) wrote his authoritative ‘Collection of All Philosophies’ (*Sarvadarśanasamgraha*), the ‘Cārvāka system’ had the distinction of receiving an elaborately sympathetic defence in the first chapter of the compilation, consisting of a reasoned defence of atheism and materialism.<sup>36</sup> After being expounded and defended in the first chapter, the atheistic claims are subjected to counterarguments in the following chapter, in line with the dialectical strategy of the book, in which each chapter defends a particular school of thought, followed by counterarguments in later chapters.

The exposition of the Cārvāka system begins with a strong assertion: ‘how can we attribute to the Divine Being the giving of supreme facility, when such a notion has been utterly abolished by Cārvāka, the crest-gem of the atheistic school?’<sup>37</sup> In addition to the denial of God, there is also a rejection of the soul, and an assertion of the material basis of the mind: ‘[from these material elements] alone, when transformed into the body, intelligence is produced, just as the inebriating power is developed from the mixing of certain ingredients; and when these are destroyed, intelligence at once perishes also.’<sup>38</sup> Along with these radical beliefs about the nature of life and mind, there is also a philosophy of value, which concentrates on identifiable pleasure, not any ‘happiness in a future world’. There is recurrent advice on how to live: ‘While life is yours, live joyously!’ There is also an acrid and cynical explanation of the cultivated survival of religious illusions among people: ‘There is no heaven, no final liberation, nor any soul in another world . . . it is only as a means of livelihood that Brahmins have established here all the ceremonies for the dead – there is no other fruit anywhere.’<sup>39</sup>

\*We find references to Cārvāka in the epics also. In the *Mahābhārata*, Cārvāka causes some shock in the establishment by reproaching Yudhiṣṭhira for killing his clansmen in the central battle of that epic (a persistent subject of moral discussion which we have already encountered twice, in the context, respectively, of the Krishna–Arjuna debates and of Draupadī’s arguments to Yudhiṣṭhira, encouraging him to fight).

## THE ARGUMENTATIVE INDIAN

The active presence of atheism and materialism continued through the regimes of Muslim kings. Indeed, even in the late sixteenth century, when the Moghal emperor Akbar held his multi-religious dialogic encounters in Agra, the Cārvāka school of atheism was well represented among the alternative positions that were selected for presentation (as Akbar's adviser and chronicler Abul Fazl noted). In philosophical discourses throughout Indian history, atheists and sceptics make frequent appearances, and even though, in many cases, their points of view are ultimately rejected, they do get their say.

An adequately inclusive understanding of Indian heterodoxy is particularly important for appreciating the reach and range of heterodoxy in the country's intellectual background and diverse history. This is especially critical because of the relative neglect of the rationalist parts of the Indian heritage in the contemporary accounts of India's past, in favour of concentrating on India's impressive religiosity. That selective inattention has, in fact, produced a substantial bias in the interpretation of Indian thought, and through that in the understanding of the intellectual heritage of contemporary India.\*

The exaggerated focus on religiosity has also contributed to an underestimation of the reach of public reasoning in India and the diversity of its coverage. For example, Kauṭilya's classic treatise on political economy and governance, *Arthaśāstra* (translatable as 'Economics'), initially composed in the fourth century BCE, is basically a secular treatise, despite the respectful gestures it makes to religious and social customs.<sup>40</sup>

The neglect has also led to the long tradition of rational assessment, central for Indian science and mathematics, being underestimated.† That particular connection is worth discussing, and I turn to that in the next section.

\*On this general issue, see my 'The Reach of Reason: East and West', *New York Review of Books*, 47 (20 July 2000), repr. as Essay 13. See also Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen, 'Internal Criticism and Indian Rationalist Traditions', in Michael Krausz (ed.), *Relativism: Interpretation and Confrontation* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), and Bimal Matilal, *Perception: An Essay on Classical Indian Theories of Knowledge* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986).

†In fairness to Western expertise on India, it must be conceded that there has never been any lack of Occidental interest in what may be called the 'carnal sciences', led by the irrepressible *Kāmasūtra* and *Anaṅgarāga*.

*Science, Epistemology and Heterodoxy*

It is not hard to see that the possibility of scientific advance is closely connected with the role of heterodoxy, since new ideas and discoveries have to emerge initially as heterodox views, which differ from, and may be in conflict with, established understanding. The history of scientific contributions across the world – the experiences of Copernicus, or Galileo, or Newton, or Darwin – shows many examples of the part that resolute heterodoxy has to play, in scrutinizing, and when necessary rejecting, the views that are standardly accepted. We can argue that the flowering of Indian science and mathematics that began in the Gupta period (led particularly by Āryabhaṭa in the fifth century CE, Varāhamihira in the sixth, and Brahmagupta in the seventh) benefited from the tradition of scepticism and questioning which had been flourishing in India at that time.<sup>41</sup> There are also methodological departures in this period in epistemology and in investigating the ways and means of advancing the knowledge of the phenomenal world.<sup>42</sup>

In the *Rāmāyaṇa*, Jāvālī, a sceptical pundit, lectures Rama, the hero of the epic, on how he should behave, but in the process supplements his religious scepticism by an insistence that we must rely only on what we can observe and experience. His denunciation of religious practices ('the injunctions about the worship of gods, sacrifice, gifts and penance have been laid down in the śāstras [scriptures] by clever people, just to rule over [other] people') and his debunking of religious beliefs ('there is no after-world, nor any religious practice for attaining that') are fortified by the firm epistemological advice that Jāvālī gives Rama: 'Follow what is within your experience and do not trouble yourself with what lies beyond the province of human experience.'<sup>43</sup>

This observational focus is, of course, in line with the materialism of Lokāyata and the Cārvāka system. In fact, however, the Cārvāka system went further and suggested the need for methodological scrutiny of knowledge that is derived – directly or indirectly – from perception. We are told that perception is of two kinds: external and internal. Internal perception is obviously dubious because 'you cannot

## THE ARGUMENTATIVE INDIAN

establish that the mind has any power to act independently towards an external object, since all allow that it is dependent on external senses'.<sup>44</sup> But we must be cautious, for a different reason, about relying also on external perception: it depends on how we use this perception. 'Although it is possible that the actual contact of the sense and the object will produce the knowledge of the particular object', often we shall have to rely on propositions that link and connect one object that we may fail to see to another that we can see (such as an unseen fire presumed on the basis of observed smoke). Indeed, there can be no direct observation of objects in the past or in the future, about which we may seek knowledge, and we then have to trace alleged connections over time.

And yet the basis of this type of extension from direct observation remains, it is argued, problematic. While we may be tempted to rely on such connections, 'there might arise a doubt as to the existence of the invariable connection in this particular case (as, for instance, in this particular smoke as implying fire)'.<sup>45</sup> The use of inference is hard to make rigorous, since inference itself requires justification, and this may take us further and further back: 'Nor can *inference* be the means of knowledge of the universal proposition, since in the case of this inference we should also require another inference to establish it, and so on, and hence would arise the fallacy of an *ad infinitum* retrogression'.<sup>46</sup>

If the Lokāyata approach comes through as being intensely argumentative and very dedicated to raising methodological doubts (going well beyond merely disputing the basis of religious knowledge), that is probably a just conclusion. Indeed, Buddhaghōṣa, a Buddhist philosopher in fifth-century India, thought that even though Lokāyata can be literally interpreted as the discipline that bases knowledge only on 'the material world', it could perhaps be better described as the 'discipline of arguments and disputes'.<sup>47</sup> In this respect, the rationale of the Lokāyata approach is quite close to a methodological point that Francis Bacon would make with compelling clarity in 1605 in his treatise *The Advancement of Learning*. 'The registering and proposing of doubts has a *double* use,' Bacon said. One use is straightforward: it guards us 'against errors'. The second use, Bacon argued, involved the role of doubts in initiating and furthering a process of enquiry, which

## THE ARGUMENTATIVE INDIAN

has the effect of enriching our investigations. Issues that ‘would have been passed by lightly without intervention’, Bacon noted, end up being ‘attentively and carefully observed’ precisely because of the ‘intervention of doubts’.<sup>48</sup>

If epistemological departures from orthodoxy provided methodological help for the cultivation of observational science, so did a catholicity of approach that allowed Indian mathematicians and scientists to learn about the works in these fields in Babylon, Greece and Rome, which were extensively used in Indian astronomy (particularly in the Siddhāntas) which preceded the flowering of Indian science and mathematics from the fifth century CE onwards. There has been a tendency in the new ‘nationalism’ of the Hindutva movement (discussed further in Essay 3) to deny the importance of global interactions going in different directions (in favour of what can be called ‘indigenous sufficiency’). But that reflects a basic misunderstanding of how science proceeds and why the borders of scientific knowledge are not drawn along geographical lines. As it happens, a great many departures in science and mathematics occurred in India from the early centuries of the first millennium which altered the state of knowledge in the world. The interactive openness of Indian work involved both give and take. Indian trigonometry and astronomy, in particular, are of special interest both because of their historical importance and because of the way in which they influenced (as is discussed in Essays 6 and 8) India’s relations with other civilizations, particularly the Arab world and China.

In fact, Indian mathematics and astronomy had a particularly profound impact on Arab work (including Iranian work in Arabic) to both of which Arabs and Iranians gave generous acknowledgement. This applied to foundational departures in mathematics (particularly in the development and use of the decimal system and in trigonometry) and also to new ideas and measurements in astronomy. Indeed, the departures presented in Āryabhaṭa’s pioneering book, completed in 499 CE, not only generated extensive responses within India (starting with the works of Varāhamihira, Brahmagupta and Bhāskara), but they were also much discussed in their Arabic translations.

In addition to the mathematical advances reflected in Āryabhaṭa’s work, the astronomical departures included, among a number of other contributions, the following:



## THE ARGUMENTATIVE INDIAN

- (1) an explanation of lunar and solar eclipses in terms respectively of the earth's shadow on the moon and the moon's obscuring of the sun, combined with methods of predicting the timing and duration of eclipses;
- (2) rejection of the standard view of an orbiting sun that went around the earth, in favour of the diurnal motion of the earth;
- (3) an identification of the force of gravity to explain why objects are not thrown out as the earth rotates; and
- (4) a proposal of the situational variability of the idea of 'up' and 'down' depending on where one is located on the globe, undermining the 'high above' status of heavenly objects (but directly in line with the philosophy of relying on what Jāvāli called 'the province of human experience').

In addition to contributing to scientific understanding, these astronomical advances also involved sharp departures from the established religious orthodoxy. Āryabhaṭa's insistence on working on these issues and on publicizing his findings involved considerable courage and determination.

As Alberuni, the Iranian astronomer, wrote in the early eleventh century, not all of Āryabhaṭa's disciples who followed his scientific lead and algorithmic methods were similarly courageous. Indeed, Brahmagupta, whom Alberuni judged to be the best mathematician of his time (Alberuni even produced a second Arabic translation of Brahmagupta's Sanskrit treatise *Brahmasiddhānta*, having judged the earlier translation, made in the eighth century, to be rather imperfect), clearly lacked Āryabhaṭa's fortitude and uprightness. Brahmagupta played up to religious orthodoxy by criticizing Āryabhaṭa for apostasy in rejecting the established theological astrology, even though Brahmagupta himself continued to use Āryabhaṭa's scientific methods and procedures.

In a remarkable eleventh-century rebuke, Alberuni noted the self-contradiction here, to wit that Brahmagupta, too, followed Āryabhaṭa's scientific methods in predicting eclipses while spinelessly kowtowing to orthodoxy through bad-mouthing Āryabhaṭa:

We shall not argue with him [Brahmagupta], but only whisper into his ear: . . . Why do you, after having spoken such [harsh] words [against Āryabhaṭa and his followers], then begin to calculate the diameter of the moon in order to explain the eclipsing of the sun, and the diameter of the shadow of the

## THE ARGUMENTATIVE INDIAN

earth in order to explain its eclipsing the moon? Why do you compute both eclipses in agreement with the theory of those heretics, and not according to the views of those with whom you think it is proper to agree?<sup>49</sup>

In terms of mathematics and astronomical practice, Brahmagupta was indeed a great follower of the innovative Āryabhaṭa, and as good a mathematician as Āryabhaṭa (possibly even better), but Alberuni doubted that he could have been as fearless a pioneer as Āryabhaṭa clearly was. The constructive role of heterodoxy and of the courage to disagree is not any less pivotal in science than it is in the fostering of public reasoning and in constructing the roots of political democracy.

*The Importance of Arguments*

Before closing this essay, I should make clear what is and, no less important, what is not being claimed. There is, in particular, no proposal here to seek a single-factor explanation of India's 'past and present' through an exclusive and separate focus on one particular feature out of a multitude that can be found in India's constantly evolving traditions. To recognize the importance of an argumentative heritage and of the history of heterodoxy does not in any way do away with the need to look at the impact of other influences, nor obviate the necessity of investigating the interactions of different influences.

It also definitely does not encourage us to think of any social feature as an unchanging, perennial characteristic of an 'eternal India'. India has undergone radical developments and changes over its long history which cannot be understood without bringing in a variety of factors, circumstances and causal connections that have had – and are continuing to have – their impact. The particular point of the focus on heterodoxy and loquaciousness is not so much to elevate the role of tradition in the development of India, but to seek a fuller reading of Indian traditions, which have interacted with other factors in the dynamism of Indian society and culture.

Consider the relevance of ongoing traditions for the development of democracy – an issue that was briefly discussed earlier. In his autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*, Nelson Mandela notes that as a

## THE ARGUMENTATIVE INDIAN

young boy he learned about the importance of democracy from the practice of the local African meetings that were held in the regent's house in Mqhekezweni:

Everyone who wanted to speak did so. It was democracy in its purest form. There may have been a hierarchy of importance among the speakers, but everyone was heard, chief and subject, warrior and medicine man, shopkeeper and farmer, landowner and laborer. . . . The foundation of self-government was that all men were free to voice their opinions and equal in their value as citizens.<sup>50</sup>

In arguing that his 'long walk to freedom' began at home, Mandela was not claiming that nothing else mattered in taking him towards the fight for democracy, nor that democracy would have no relevance to South Africa had its social heritage been different. The point is, rather, that the traditions Mandela saw at home were momentous, and they interacted with other significant factors that influenced him – and others – in South Africa. And since the democratic precursors in Africa had been fairly widely neglected in discussions on politics and colonial history, it was particularly important for Mandela to bring out the role of Africa's historical traditions.<sup>51</sup>

It is in this broad context that one can see the importance of the contributions made by India's argumentative tradition to its intellectual and social history, and why they remain relevant today. Despite the complexity of the processes of social change, traditions have their own interactive influence, and it is necessary to avoid being imprisoned in formulaic interpretations that are constantly, but often uncritically, repeated in intellectual as well as political discussions on historical traditions. For example, seeing Indian traditions as overwhelmingly religious, or deeply anti-scientific, or exclusively hierarchical, or fundamentally unsceptical (to consider a set of diagnoses that have received some championing in cultural categorizations) involves significant oversimplification of India's past and present. And in so far as traditions are important, these mischaracterizations tend to have a seriously diverting effect on the analysis of contemporary India as well as of its complex history. It is in that broad context that the corrective on which this essay concentrates comes particularly into its own. The claim is that the chosen focus here is useful and instructive, not that it is uniquely enlightening.

## THE ARGUMENTATIVE INDIAN

It is in this broad context that it becomes particularly important to note that heterodoxy has been championed in many different ways throughout Indian history, and the argumentative tradition remains very much alive today. This tradition has received understanding and support from many of the modern leaders of India – not only political leaders such as Mohandas Gandhi, but also people in other walks of life, such as Rabindranath Tagore. Tagore, who was proud of the fact that his family background reflected ‘a confluence of three cultures, Hindu, Mohammedan and British’,<sup>52</sup> emphasized the need to be vigilant in defence of this open-minded tradition and to help it to flower more fully.

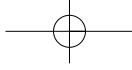
Like Akbar’s championing of *rahi aql* (the path of reason), Tagore emphasized the role of deliberation and reasoning as the foundation of a good society:

Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high;  
Where knowledge is free;  
Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow  
domestic walls; . . .  
Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into the dreary desert  
sand of dead habit; . . .  
Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake.<sup>53</sup>

That task, momentous as it is, is made easier, I have argued, by the long history and consummate strength of our argumentative tradition, which we have reason to celebrate and to defend.

I end on a positive (if somewhat light-hearted) note, by recollecting a nineteenth-century Bengali poem by Ram Mohun Roy which bears on the subject matter of this essay.\* Roy explains what is really dreadful about death:

\*Ram Mohun Roy was one of the pioneering reformers in nineteenth-century India, whose intellectual contributions matched his public work and leadership. In his far-reaching history of the emergence of the modern world, C. A. Bayly illuminatingly discusses the role of Ram Mohun Roy, ‘who made in two decades an astonishing leap from the status of a late-Moghul state intellectual to that of the first Indian liberal’, and who ‘independently broached themes that were being simultaneously developed in Europe by Garibaldi and Saint-Simon’ (*The Birth of the Modern World 1780–1914*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2004, p. 293). Ram Mohun Roy’s love of reasoned arguments combined well with the independence and reach of his mind.



#### THE ARGUMENTATIVE INDIAN

Just consider how terrible the day of your death will be.

Others will go on speaking, and you will not be able to argue back.

We are told, in line with our loquacious culture, that the real hardship of death consists of the frustrating – *very* frustrating – inability to argue. There is, actually, an interesting vision behind this extraordinary diagnosis.

